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Housekeepers' Chat

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NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Making the Living Room Livable." (Takes place of "How to Select a Rug.") By Ruth Van Deman, the "menu specialist" of the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. D. A.

Bulletin available: "Floors and Floor Coverings."

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The other day I planned a talk about rugs and carpets. But when I began to gather my information together, I found that all I had intended to say, and a great deal more, is in the free bulletin called "Floors and Floor Coverings."

What's the use, I said to myself, of my broadcasting what is already in print. Any one who is considering the purchase of a rug, or carpet, or linoleum, can get the most reliable advice from this bulletin. So, if you want practical pointers about rugs, I suggest that you send for the bulletin called "Floors and Floor Coverings."

I have another reason for changing the title of my program. The Menu Specialist and I were talking about making over living rooms. I told her about Great-aunt Julia's parlor -- a cold, unfriendly room which always made me feel uncomfortable. There was a table in the center of the room, a square table, with a heavy red plush cover, which had a deep fringe ending in little fuzzy balls. On the table there was a large album, with heavy metal clasps, and a large china vase filled with artificial flowers. I was never allowed to open the album or to touch the flowers. The curtains in this room were of some heavy, somber material, and the shades were always drawn. Sunshine, said Great-aunt Julia, would fade the flowers in the rug. The stiff chairs were placed with their backs to the wall; each chair had its special spot, and was not to be moved.

"There," I said to the Menu Specialist, "you have a picture of the parlor in which I spent a good many Sunday afternoons; is it any wonder that I want my living room to be a come-in-and-make-yourself-at-home sort of place, with sunshine and flowers, and books and magazines, and comfortable chairs? If Billy wants to spread the Sunday paper on the floor, it's all right with me. Uncle Ebenezer can move his old easy chair anywhere he pleases; so long as he's happy, why should I mind?"

"Speaking of comfortable chairs," said the Menu Specialist, "why do people have any other kind? I like comfortable chairs, and I like them placed in the best position in the room for use, as well as for looks."

In fact, that's about the whole secret of making a living room livable -- to have simple, attractive furnishings, and then to place them where they will serve the purpose they were built for. Generally this will make the best looking room too -- as any interior decorator will tell you. Speaking of interior decorations, Aunt Sammy, I'm going to tell you what three friends of mine did to transform a stiff old parlor into a comfortable family living room. They didn't buy a single new thing; they just re-arranged what was there, according to ideas of comfort and use. Incidentally, they also followed the principles of balance, proportion, harmony, and the other high-sounding terms interior decorators use. But I'm not going to give you theory, I'm going to tell you just what they did. In the first place --"

"Please, Miss Menu Specialist," I interrupted. "Write this story for me, so I can broadcast it. I know it will be interesting -- so why not let our radio friends in on it?"

"Well," said the Menu Specialist, "I was working on a menu, with Mulligatawny soup."

"That's all right," I said. "We'll have the Mulligatawny soup some other time."

The Menu Specialist put away her recipes and menus, and wrote us this "true story," of how Doctor Jane's parlor became a living room. I shall read the Menu Specialist's story, just as she wrote it. The title is:

MAKING THE LIVING ROOM LIVABLE

Dr. Jane's house, and particularly her big front room, was full of fine old-fashioned furniture -- the kind dealers are going through the country buying up nowadays. The rugs also, and the pictures and curtains, were attractive, and harmonized well in color and style. The trouble was, Dr. Jane's room was a parlor, not a living room.

There were four nice chairs, set primly on the four corners of the large rug. The piano occupied the very best place in the room, and gave the impression of a parlor full of piano. A marble-topped table stood plumb in the center of the bay window, leaving room for nothing else, and shutting off light and view. A big easy chair, where Dr. Jane sat every evening, was right between two doors, always in a draft. She threw a shawl around her shoulder, just as regularly as she sat down.

And the mantel! You have all seen lots of mantels that looked like that. There were two really nice vases, and a fine old clock, but they were lost in a forest of tissue paper gimcracks, artificial trees, and cards left over several Christmases. Then, standing up against the beautiful mirror, at the back of the mantel, were photographs of all the babies and high-school graduates of the family for several generations.

On the top of the piano were more photographs, some standing up straight, and some flopped over, on a pile of sheet music and hymn books.

There, that gives you a general picture of Dr. Jane's parlor. Everything for comfort and beauty, but missing it by a mile.

The three young persons, who had conspired to transform that room, waited their chance. It came one evening when Dr. Jane asked the musician of the trio, who was also a husky young man, whether he thought the piano might be injured by the heat from the register. It certainly was in danger, he told her frankly, and immediately he jumped up, beckoned to the others, and declared they were ready to move it if she but said the word. The next minute the piano was rolling toward the opposite wall between the two doorways, where it just fitted. Then of course Dr. Jane's easy chair, and a small table and lamp, just had to be moved where the piano had been.

As soon as Dr. Jane sat down in her big chair after the move, she discovered that the arrangement was better for the piano, and for herself too. There was no draft on the back of her neck, and the light fell full on her book, over her left shoulder.

So she asked whether they had any other changes to suggest. Had they? Certainly they had, and there wasn't much in that room they didn't change, before they got through.

They pushed the marble-topped table to the side of the bay window, and turned it so that there is room beside it for a comfortable chair. Here Dr. Jane can sit, and get the fine view of the distant hills. Over the marble top, which looks so cold and forbidding, they draped an old-fashioned chintz cover, which Dr. Jane brought out of a chest. A lamp with a plain, creamy parchment shade, they brought from a corner, where it did no special good, and placed on this table. This made a second, well-lighted reading center. Behind the lamp next to the wall, they set up between brass book-ends a few of the recent books with gay bindings.

From the mantel, they banished everything but the vases, and the clock, and a small red lacquer box. The vases are soft blue in color and plain in shape. Next fall Dr. Jane is going to fill them with orange and red bittersweet to give gay color all winter. The top of the piano is now perfectly bare, so that when it is played, there is nothing on it to rustle, or to muffle the tone. The photographs have vanished, leaving just one, a well-framed likeness of Dr. Jane's father, on the table by her easy chair.

The small rugs, which ran diagonally across the bare floor, they straightened, parallel with the large rug. This made the room seem wider, and more restful, and took away the effect of a jig-saw border around the large rug.

They rehung the pictures too, bringing them into better light, and down near the level of the eye.

The fine old secretary-desk, they opened up, placed pen and ink ready for use, and moved the floor lamp near it. They persuaded Dr. Jane to take the dark silk curtains from the glass doors of the secretary, so her books can be seen. There's almost nothing like rows of different colored books to add color to a room, they told her, and she agreed when she saw the change.

Dr. Jane is so pleased with the transformation of her parlor into a livable living room, that she talks about it to every one who comes in. She gave me permission to tell you about it, in case you want to try your hand at applying the theories of the interior decorators to your living room, one of these early spring days.

Tomorrow: "Yarbs" and Spring Tonics. Program includes recipe for Mulligatawny Soup.

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